

Marcus Taylor and Sébastien Rioux

**Global Labour Studies**

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018, £16.99, (ISBN: 9781509504077), 248pp.

**Reviewed by** CONSTANTINE MANOLCHEV, *University of Exeter Business School*

*794 words*

Placed on a continuum between acute precarity and relative insecurity, with elements of migration, forced labour, environmental concerns and an enduring North – South divide, the subject of global labour continues to generate multi-disciplinary research interest. Within it, complex production and consumption relationships, network governance and unionisation dynamics have emerged in response to rising levels of global risk and uncertainty and created a field compelling and challenging in equal parts. This is why, although primarily concerned with debates around work, inequality, productivity and exploitation, the subject of global labour is no longer circumscribed by a single discipline and requires a framework able to engage its core debates in a non-reductive manner.

Marcus Taylor and Sébastien Rioux' 'Global Labour Studies' reader, a succinct yet perfectly-formed overview of current and emerging themes, seeks to provide just such a framework. Through the inspired synthesis of economic sociology, political economy and human geography, the authors build a multi-purpose analytical vehicle and proceed to test it across formal and informal labour terrains, concluding with an exploration of the mutually-transformative relationship between labour and the environment. These individual perspectives are continually illustrated with case studies and vignettes in order to remind the reader that the global labour experience is "intrinsically" (p.46) political and always personal.

The economic sociology lens of the global studies framework is illustrated through an overview of power imbalances across global production networks. Of particular interest to the reader is the provision of succinct case-studies to illustrate value-chain governance in Chapter 4, while scholars of industrial relations will find Chapter 5 particularly interesting, as it traces the disintegration of formal work in the welfare state in the UK and subsequent rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s. It is at this point that Taylor and Rioux capture the zeitgeist of WES debates on the emergence of a

precarious class of insecure, temporary workers. The authors' probing and theoretically-rich discussion centres on the developmental and livelihood consequences of flexible work in a neoliberal context. Their historical, labour studies analysis convincingly shows that lack of workplace security continues to have a material impact on workers' incomes, regardless of whether those workers are engaged in the sharing economy, gig, or 'post-formal' work (pp. 77-82).

The political economy perspective, with its focus on power and inequality is applied to the subject of informal work and different types of migrant work. Combining ILO data and Marxian theory, Chapter 8 provides a comprehensive discussion on worker vulnerability across multiple contexts and settings. The narrative is carefully balanced and the informal economy presented as a paradox of choice and lack of alternatives. A persistent North-South divide underpins the existence of a large proportion of labourers in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, for whom informal work is the norm and therefore simultaneously a means of subsistence and exploitation. This perspective could have served as a prelude to a discussion of marginalisation yet this theme, familiar to WES readers, is regrettably somewhat underdeveloped. However, the issue of forced labour (Chapter 9), also frequently discussed on the pages of WES is a highlight in Taylor and Rioux' text.

The human geography approach underscores the relationship of mutual dependency between nature and labour, not only in the context of the agricultural sector but in the sense of labour as a human activity capable of large-scale planetary damage. Latin America's 'Republic of Soy' mini case-study is a lively and visceral preface to the subject of modernisation and the pressures it places on agrarian labour, invoking concerns for both environmental sustainability and worker exploitation (Chapter 7). Citing growing depletion and loss of biosphere resources, Taylor and Rioux suggest there is an urgent need to consider what is morally right as well as economically lucrative. The authors warn that current levels of natural exploitation through human labour are leading to the emergence of an entirely new geological era which is neither desirable, nor sustainable. Thus, Chapter 10's case studies on changing natural terrains such as the Niger Delta and Mongolia lead to an uneasy conclusion. If environmental damage increases, so will inequality in wealth distribution, and the book's final chapter highlights the persistence of poverty and "jobless growth"

(p.211) which, joined by technological and environmental change, are becoming formidable threats to the global production of labour.

Skilfully tracing historical trajectories with current and emerging directions, Taylor and Rioux' reader is no 'ivory tower' review. Rich in colours, noises, smells and struggles, it combines illustrative flair and theoretical erudition. The accessible and conversational narrative works well throughout the book, and adds an interactive, 'at-a-glance-reference' quality to the text. This makes it equally useful as a graduate/undergraduate reader and a reference for those WES readers with an interest in the production and reproduction of labour across a wide-ranging array of contexts and terrains.